

Hard Winter Forecasts Haven't Caused Exodus Of Shortgrassers

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MERTZON — Showers which should have fallen at the start of the growing season are soaking the rangelands, but the altered cycle doesn't mean that cold weather has been delayed. In the fickle Shortgrass Country, summer can be ended with a killing frost and winter terminated by the June festival. Citizens never know whether to leave the house clad in a fur-lined parka or loose fitting burnoose. Northerners deadheading this way are often diverted by unforeseen easterly winds; southern gales are suddenly dissipated by unexpected whirlwinds.

Professional weathermen, needless to say retire early in these parts. Replacement meteorologists are harder to find than repeat customers in the pet coon business. Amateurs are a different matter.

Before the heat wave ended last summer, hombres around the coffeehouses were predicting a severe winter. They knew they couldn't be wrong, because the last good winter we had was shortly after the close of the Ice Age. Though no one paid them any attention, these unpaid and unasked-for prophets kept saying every morning that we were fixing to have the worst spell of weather in many a year. Every time the local feed miller and transient feed salesmen were seen chattering gaily over their coffee, the grumblers would increase the dimensions of their predictions.

At one time it was hard to concentrate on the threat of cold weather. Lambs and calves were wilting on the wrong end of the vine to such an extent that economic survival until Labor Day seemed an impossible goal. You had to get up before the evening star had set to gather any stock. Had those boys sitting around the air conditioned cafe stepped out the front door, they would have encountered enough bad weather to fill a history volume.

The rush of the shipping season did cut down on the prophesizing. Once everybody began to realize the working force wasn't strong enough to barricade a blind alley, the weather wise guys became more interested in their own welfare than in charting dews and wind currents. If the truck shortage had been any worse than it was, the entire craft of foretelling figure climate would have been abandoned.

Interest in the winter wasn't revived until reports of the milo price boycott began to come in. The minute the news hit that the farmers were going to try to get more for this all-important feed commodity, the pessimists took right up where they'd stopped when the delivery period began. You couldn't go anywhere without overhearing some fellow moaning about how rough it was going to be after frost hit.

Steadily, the anxiety level increased. A truckload of hay couldn't pass through town without the ranchers moaning in unison that the end was close at hand.

As usual, the whole thing was pure imagination. There were not justifiable reasons to believe that conditions were going to get any worse.

What if the toxic weed areas did have seven different stages of bitterweed coming on to kill the sheep? The price of dead wool was steady, and breaks in other markets would soon be overshadowed by the increase in feed prices.

Just because a dozen signs point toward a frigid heartbreaker doesn't mean we should give up hope. If worst comes to worst, or acute crisis turns into dead end desperation, we can always go back to robbing the pecans out of squirrel's nests like we did back in the awful winters of the 1950s. I heard a fellow say the other day that the wild nut crop was good down on the river, so with that sort of backstop in mind, it's take a terrible spell to drive us away from here.

These people will rally to fight again. Right now they are upset, but in 30 days' time they'll be whistling beef haul polkas to the tune of cake hitting the frozen ground.

Shortgrassers get tougher every day. Two bad winters in a row might knock them down, but I don't think the Arctic has anything that can get them on one round.